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ABSTRACT

Recently, research has examined interpersonal factors that influence the maintenance of depression. Data suggest that depressives tend to alienate others in their social environment. This study examined rejection effects following repeated exposure to a stranger whose depressive symptomatology increased, decreased, or remained unchanged. Female undergraduate subjects (N=64) watched a series of three videotaped interactions between two female confederates. One of the confederates, the target subject, enacted different levels of depression. The enactments, which defined four experimental conditions, were of consistent depression, increasing depression, decreasing depression, and consistent nondepression (normalcy). One-half of the subjects assigned to each condition expected to be paired with the target subject in four future sessions, the other one-half expected to be paired with co-participants in the study. The results revealed that rejection responses as reflected in reluctance to engage in future encounters with, and negative perceptions of, the target subject were generally strongest toward the unchanging and deteriorating depressive, less pronounced toward the improving depressive, and least apparent toward the normal persons. Expectation of involvement with the target subject, versus nonexpectation, was for the most part associated with a trend toward less rejection in all four experimental conditions of depression. (Author/NB)

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Rejection Effects Following Repeated Exposure To a Depressed Stranger as a Function of Changing Severity of Depression and Expectation of Future Encounters

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Abstract

Sixty-four female undergraduate subjects watched a series of three videotaped interactions between two female confederates, one of whom--the target subject--enacted different levels of depression. The enactments, which defined four experimental conditions, were of consistent depression, increasing depression, decreasing depression, and consistent nondepression (normalcy). Half of the subjects assigned to each condition expected to be paired with the target subject in four future sessions, and half expected to be paired with co-participants in the study. Rejection responses as reflected in reluctance to engage in future encounters with and negative perceptions of the target subject were generally strongest toward the unchanging and deteriorating depressive, less pronounced toward the improving depressive, and least apparent toward the normal person. Expectation of involvement with the target subject, versus nonexpectation, was for the most part associated with a trend toward less rejection in all four experimental conditions of depression.

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Paper presented at SEPA: March, 1987

REJECTION EFFECTS FOLLOWING REPEATED EXPOSURE TO A DEPRESSED STRANGER AS A FUNCTION OF CHANGING SEVERITY OF DEPRESSION AND EXPECTATION OF FUTURE ENCOUNTERS

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In the past decade, a growing body of research has focused on interpersonal factors that influence the maintenance of depression. This approach has produced data suggesting that depressives tend to alienate others in their social environment. Most of the pertinent investigations have focused on single encounters between strangers, with others' rejection of depressives characterized as unwillingness to continue a given relationship in various specific ways. Some have also examined others' perceptions of depressives as well as others' nonverbal behavior during interactions with depressives, under the assumption that negative cognitive and nonverbal behavioral reactions are covert expressions of rejection.

The purpose of the present study was to examine rejection effects following repeated exposure to a stranger whose depressive symptomotology increased, decreased, or remained unchanged. As a test of the possibility that a dread of deepening involvement may underlie reluctance to interact further with a depressed individual, a second independent variable--expectation of future interactions--was introduced into the

research design.

Specifically, it was predicted that: (1) repeated exposure to a depressed stranger, as opposed to a nondepressed stranger, will lead to greater rejection; (2) repeated exposure to a stranger whose depressive symptomatology remains unchanged or increases, versus one whose symptomatology disappears, will lead to greater rejection; and (3) expectation, versus nonexpectation, of future involvement with a stranger whose depressive symptomatology remains unchanged, increases, or decreases after repeated exposure, will lead to greater rejection; but with a nondepressed stranger who develops no depressive symptomatology after repeated exposure, will lead to no difference in rejection.

Method

Subjects were 64 undergraduate women fulfilling research participation requirements for introductory psychology courses. They were videotaped through a one-way mirror as they themselves viewed an experimenter-produced videotape depicting one of the four depression conditions. In each of the four videotapes, two paid confederates portrayed students engaged in a series of three brief encounters held at three-week intervals. The actors were postgraduate women, trained in their respective roles.

Confederate A, the target person, varied her role according to the depression condition depicted: a depressive whose moderate-to-severe symptomatology remained unchanged throughout each of the three encounters; a normal person (first encounter) who displayed mild (second encounter), and then moderate-to-severe (third encounter) depressive symptomatology; a depressive

whose moderate-to-severe symptomatology (first encounter) decreased (second encounter) and disappeared (third encounter); and a normal person who exhibited no depressive symptomatology in any of the encounters. Confederate B consistently enacted the role of a normal, nondepressed individual.

Subjects were informed that all aspects of their participation would be routinely videotaped, and were led to believe that the study was concerned with learning to cooperate effectively--specifically, with whether watching others who were learning cooperative techniques would facilitate an observer's performance. Subjects in the expectation of interaction condition were advised that they were to be paired in that day's session and three future sessions with the student labeled "A" in the videotape. Subjects in the nonexpectation condition were advised that they were to be paired successively with four other research participants in each of the upcoming sessions.

Videotapes of subjects, made as they viewed the confederate videotapes, were later rated for facial expressions. After the viewing, subjects completed two dependent measure rating scales and two manipulation checks. They were then debriefed, told that anticipated sessions with assigned partners would not take place, and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

The first hypothesis was clearly supported by the two sets of self-report data. Subjects who experienced repeated vicarious encounters with a consistently depressed stranger, versus a consistently normal stranger, expressed significantly more

rejection, both in terms of reluctance to engage in future interactions, $F(1, 56) = 9.54$, $p < .0031$, and in terms of negative perceptions, $F(1, 56) = 12.80$, $p < .0007$. The reluctance response means, 46.94 versus 33.38 respectively, can be seen in Figure 1, and the perception response means, 61.5 versus 31.5 respectively, can be seen in Figure 2.

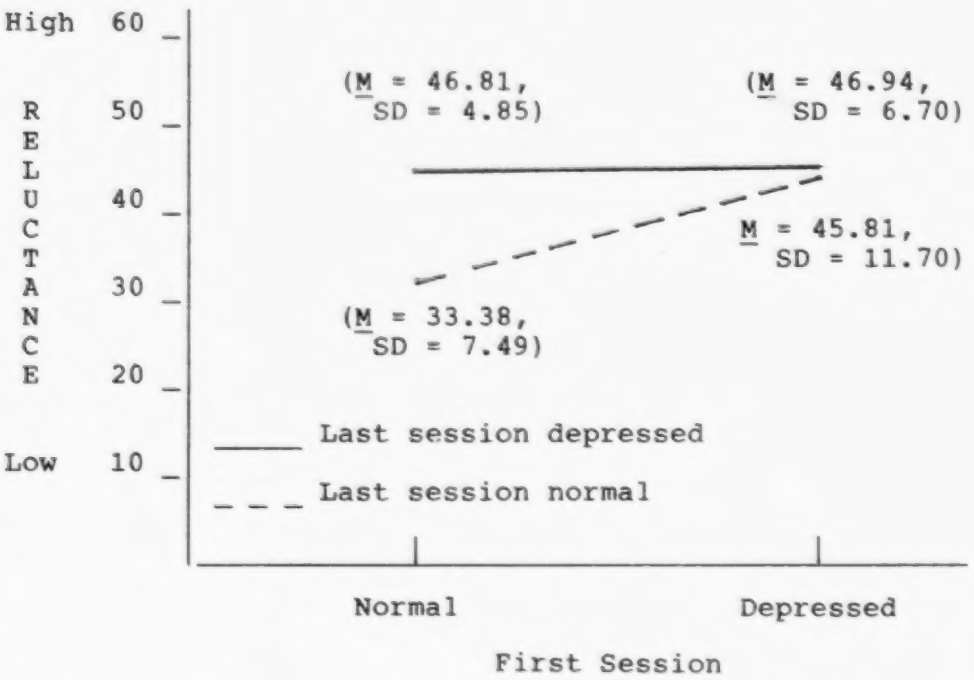

Figure 1. Reluctance of subjects to meet with confederate A in future interactions.

The second hypothesis received only partial support from self-report data. Subjects who experienced repeated vicarious encounters with an increasingly depressed ($M = 58$) or consistently depressed stranger ($M = 61.5$), versus a decreasingly depressed stranger ($M = 52$), reported a significantly higher

degree of negative perception (see Figure 2) as predicted. No difference was found, however, in amount of reluctance to engage in future interactions, with the respective means (see Figure 1) 46.81, 46.94, and 45.81.

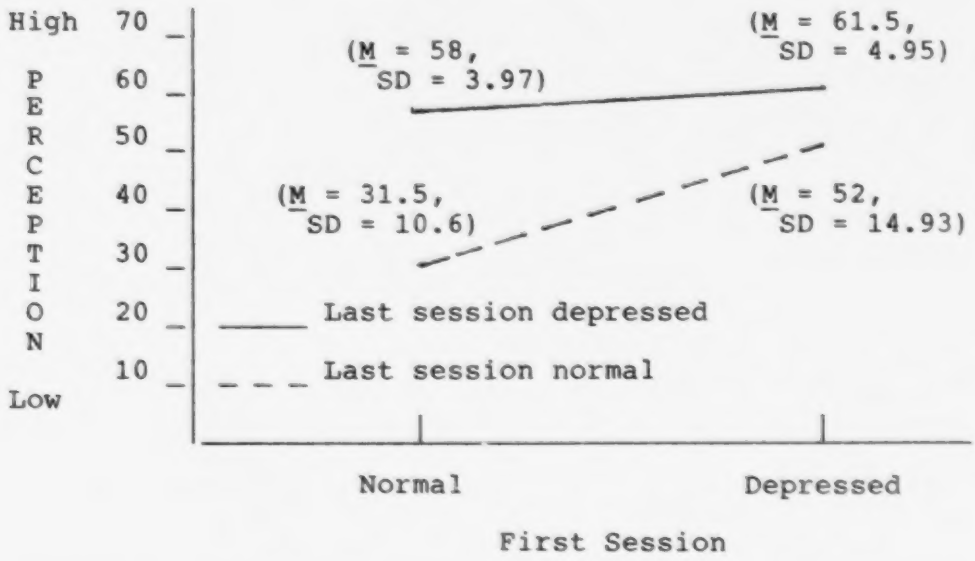

Figure 2. Subjects' negative perception of confederate A.

The difference between the patterns of results for negative perception and reluctance to engage in future interactions was found in reactions to the former depressive. Although perceptions of her were less negative than those of a current depressive, a comparable difference was not observed on the reluctance measure. Implicit in the difference may be the dread that someone who was once depressed may again be depressed.

Contrary to the third hypothesis, subjects who expected confederate A as a partner (M = 41.13), regardless of her mood enactment, were less reluctant to meet with her than subjects who

did not expect her as a partner (M = 45.34), $F(1, 56) = 4.48$, $p < .039$. A slightly different pattern of results emerged with regard to negative perception. Here there was no difference between subjects who did and did not expect future encounters with the target stranger across depression conditions.

These findings suggest that subjects' expectation of future encounters with a person who was or had been depressed may have been cognitively inconsistent with negative perceptions of that person. If so, the cognitive inconsistency could have been reduced by altered perceptions of the target person. The role of expectation in the case of subjects who experienced vicarious encounters with a consistently nondepressed stranger may have an equally simple explanation. That these subjects perceived confederate A as normal is confirmed by their responses to validation items. If, however, they also perceived her as threateningly competent at the cooperative task described as the basis for future on-camera encounters, the expectation of being paired with her in those encounters may have caused subjects to employ cognitive distortion in an effort to reduce their apprehension.

Data relevant to the third hypothesis points to a possible tendency to inhibit rejection responses present when subjects expect future interactions with a consistently depressed, increasingly depressed, or decreasingly depressed stranger. This inference is consistent with Coyne's (1976) interactional theory of depression, which posits an initial inhibition of overt expressions of negativity toward a depressive. The pattern of

inferred inhibition suggests that subjects in the expectation condition were mentally fortifying themselves for an unavoidable ordeal by telling themselves it would be less disagreeable than more objective appraisals indicated.

Facial expressions of subjects as they watched the videotaped enactments were not affected by experimental conditions, with the predominant response mode that of facial immobility. Since 78% of the subjects noted during their debriefing that they were unaware of being filmed, awareness of the camera is not a likely explanation for this finding. Facial expressions of persons viewing videotaped encounters do not seem to be the subtle barometers of inner reactions likely to be found in facial responses during face-to-face encounters.

The pattern of overall results suggests that a person exhibiting depressive symptomatology elicits rejection from others in the form of negative perceptions and reluctance to engage in future interactions. Although changes in perception appear to keep pace with the diminishing severity of symptoms, changes in general willingness to spend more time with a former depressive apparently do not. Rejection responses were on the whole strongest toward unchanging and deteriorating depressives and less pronounced toward improving depressives. In the latter case, the implication is that initially negative reactions to the past depression were reflected in modified reactions to the more recent normalcy. It might be anticipated that as time elapsed and the normal behavior persisted, the earlier negative reaction would carry less and less weight in the current reaction.

The pattern further suggests that the expectation of actual encounters with a currently or formerly depressed person may lead to the partial inhibition of the rejection reaction, particularly where reluctance to engage in future interactions is concerned, and less obviously in terms of negative perception. Expectation of continuing encounters with a depressed stranger may quickly lower the elicited rejection to a level equal to or slightly below that of nonexpectation groups. This is the pattern of results found in the present study, but the inferences drawn from it await confirmation by future investigators.

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